

spiritual which, in the fullness and clarity of its expression, is new with Baha'u'llah: knowledge, continuously gained in an ongoing process, correctly integrated, and appropriately subordinated in the human psyche, is a means - the only means, really - for journeying closer to God - which itself, is the reason we have been brought into existence by an almighty Creator. "Science is . . . the means by which man finds a pathway to God", we are told by 'Abdu'l-Baha (3). As this idea begins to permeate into the minds of men a great new civilization, embracing both the material and the spiritual, will come into being.

What is scholarship? Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines scholarship as "the fund of knowledge and learning". A scholar is "one who has done advanced study in a special field. A learned person." Scholarship, then, is connected with both generalized learning and specialized knowledge, two very different things, but both intimately linked with what I consider to be the four pillars of material civilization:

1. Research,
or creating new knowledge
2. Learning,
or the consolidation of existing knowledge
3. Teaching,
or the imparting of knowledge; and
4. Work, or
the application of knowledge.

The station of the scientist, the craftsman, the scholar, who has pursued his or her profession to an advanced degree of perfection, is very high.

Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen upon the peoples of the world. – Baha'u'llah (4)

and,

The man of consummate learning and the sage endowed with penetrating wisdom are the two eyes to the body of mankind. God willing, the earth shall never be deprived of these two greatest gifts. – Baha'u'llah (5)

Notice the phrase consummate learning. Consummate: "Complete in every detail: perfect. Extremely skilled and accomplished. Of the highest excellence or greatest degree."

II. The Importance of Scholarship

With the publication of the compilation on scholarship the Universal House of Justice, in its covering letter, expresses hope for “a further development of Baha’i scholarship” and calls upon us to “strive to develop and offer to humanity a new model of scholarly activity” (6). Why is this important? In light of the crying needs of humanity for food, shelter, protection, security, is not learning a luxury which we cannot afford at present? The short answer is simple: humanity’s problems are spiritual in origin, not material. And the intellect, the unique power of the human spirit through which the human soul comes into contact with the Spirit of Faith, is the agent in bringing spiritual solutions to bear on the otherwise overwhelming problems facing us.

As part of the long answer two reasons come to mind, both connected with acceleration of the twin processes of integration and disintegration which the beloved Guardian emphasized throughout his writings and the Universal House of Justice has recalled in many of its messages.

A. Our civilization is going through a crisis, as we all know, and mankind is in grave danger. We are traversing the last stages of what the beloved Guardian called “the dark heart of the age of transition”. What lies ahead for the human race, before the Lesser Peace dawns on the horizon of this afflicted civilization? A crisis which will bring mankind "to its knees". ". . . and when the appointed hour is come there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake" (7).

As we move through this dark heart, we see our institutions buckling - and among them, inevitably, the institutions centered around science and learning. The great cancer of materialism which has invaded those institutions is increasingly subverting them to ends other than the progress of civilization. The materialistic pressures being put on academics, such as increasing pressures to find their own funding, to produce a continuous, uninterrupted stream of publications, to produce 'acceptable' results which conform to artificial and often superficial expectations; these pressures are increasing. They have always been there, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the long history of scholarship, but never in the modern period have these pressures been as severe as now. The result is an increasing preoccupation with short-term gain - sometimes in the form of outright fraud, when the researcher, reporting results

which would require such long hours and involved procedures to verify, thinks he will simply be able to get away with it - short-term gain at the expense of long-term planning designed to unveil the precious secrets contained within a Nature which, in the words of Baha'u'llah, "will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it".

What do Baha'is have to offer to help resolve this mounting crisis in the world of learning? The high standards of integrity and equity enjoined in the writings of Baha'u'llah.

The crisis in science is also precipitated by the increasing complexity of knowledge. So much more is known now than even a few decades ago that we are, in a sense, becoming drowned in the ocean of our own scientific success. We are rapidly reaching the end of the road in our ability to expand our scientific frontiers. Traditional means whereby knowledge is consolidated are no longer adequate, and our institutions of learning seem not to be up to the new challenge. Our manner of handling and processing knowledge must evolve, and Baha'is stand to make great contributions in this evolution, either indirectly through example and inspiration, or directly. For Baha'u'llah teaches us to think in universals, and through study, absorption and internalization of the writings of our Faith, deep wells of creativity are opened.

A few years ago George Duvall, in the Department of Physics at Washington State University, outlined the problem in this fashion:

"Physics has become a very difficult subject. The expansion of the field in both depth and breadth during the last forty years is almost incomprehensible. The coherence which has characterized physics in the past is slipping away, and too little effort is being made to prevent it. There are three legitimate activities for the academic: research, teaching, and scholarship. The last of these is not properly recognized by university administrators, yet it plays a key role in science. It is the scholar who keeps up with progress on a broad front, who digests new results, synthesizes and simplifies them, integrates them with existing knowledge, and makes them available to his fellows and comprehensible to his students. To accomplish this is an intellectual feat of the greatest magnitude, and it is a natural companion to teaching. Unfortunately, scholarship of this kind does not mature quickly, it does not lead to large numbers of publications, and its merit is not easily evaluated. By failing to recognize the value of scholarship and to learn how to evaluate it,

universities are doing a great disservice to students, the faculty, the professions, and the nation.”(8)

Note the trinity of teaching, scholarship and research. Teaching: imparting existing knowledge; research: creating new knowledge; scholarship: the link between the two, the codification of knowledge which allows research to proceed with a dynamic and vital efficiency, and which makes effective teaching possible.

B. The Baha’i Faith itself has entered a period of great opportunity. There exists a marvellous analogy in our writings, comparing the Faith to the seed evolving within the fruit of present-day civilization. In the life of the plant, the instant the seed becomes mature - the instant it develops to the point at which it is ready to produce a new plant - at that instant, the fruit surrounding it which has protected it during its development, begins to decay. The decay continues until the fruit falls from the tree; it continues still until, finally, the seed is released onto the soil. And throughout this period, the seed remains impervious to the rot of the fruit. The instant the call of Baha'u'llah was raised, forces of disintegration were released into the world and all systems on the planet, some in dynamic evolution, others which had been in place unchanged for hundreds of years - all systems began to decay. As society disintegrates the Faith gains power, and we must be aware of this twin process: that although we, as individuals, are inevitably affected by the decay of society, the Faith with which we identify is immune; on the contrary, it becomes stronger and more vibrant. What lies ahead in the near future? Entry by troops, almost certainly, which will be accompanied by entry into the Faith of large numbers of people of capacity and prominence; the maturation of the Baha’i administrative institutions; an increasingly direct role in ‘solving critical social problems’. All of these developments will require increased effort in the field of scholarship.

We are coming to the end of a momentous Plan whose focus has been an advance in the process of entry by troops. We stand on the eve of a series of new plans which will carry us to the end of the first century of the Formative Age of the Faith, and which “will continue to focus on advancing the process of entry by troops and on its systematic acceleration”. In the past three and a half years we have seen “an

impressive network of training institutes on a scale but dimly imagined at the start of the Plan” (9).

Development of human resources in the Faith, with Institutes developing into Centres of Learning, will continue as an integral part of these momentous plans. Clearly, then, learning and intellectual development – raising the overall intellectual level of the Baha'i community in addition to stimulating some to attain the highest degrees of development in specialized areas or fields – is integral to the advancement in the process of entry by troops; itself vital to the rescue of this planet and its inhabitants.

III. The Pursuit of Scholarship

At the core of science, the foundation upon which science is built, is a ‘world view’ which is based on faith and which serves both as a philosophical foundation and a motivating impulse. Is Western science built upon such a foundation of faith? The philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead was convinced it was, and explained it in this way:

“I mean [by faith] the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. Without this belief the incredible labours of scientists would be without hope. It is this instinctive conviction, vividly poised before the imagination, which is the motive power of research: that there is a secret, a secret which can be unveiled. How has this conviction been so vividly implanted in the European mind?

“. . . there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search into nature could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality. . . . I am not talking of the explicit beliefs of a few individuals. . . [but] the impress on the European mind arising from the unquestioned faith of centuries.”(10)

What, then, is the

animating force behind Baha'i scholarship? In the words of the Universal House of Justice, Baha'i scholarship is "animated by the spirit of inquiry into the limitless meaning of the Divine teachings." (6)

Who is it for? Certainly not for everyone, one might think. In the world at large, a world which has come to accept that literacy is for everyone, scholarship has remained, nevertheless, an activity for only a select few. The Universal House of Justice has made it clear, however, that Baha'i scholarship, in marked contrast, is for

"members of the community of the Greatest Name, young and old, men and women alike"(6)

Those categories include just about one out of every one of us.

What characterizes the Baha'i pursuit of scholarship?

"the welcome it offers to all who wish to be involved in it, each in his or her own way"; . . . "young and old, men and women alike". (6)

I would like to give an example of a particular arena of service which we can enter, as Baha'i scholars.

Two of the most destabilizing prejudices in the world today are prejudices of gender and of race. The first step in overcoming these, is the desire to rid oneself of prejudice. Without this basic willingness prejudice cannot be overcome. But the desire or willingness, unfortunately, is not sufficient – not if we wish to be faithful to the call of

God's Manifestation for today. Passions are very strong; ingrained habits and patterns of thought work insidiously on our psyche; generations of miseducation conspire to subvert our impartiality and cloud our judgment. With regard to race relations, for instance, the Guardian warned white Americans against condescension, which in some ways is worse than outright prejudice. He warns them against impatience with a people who have "received such slow-healing wounds". With regard to the way men treat women, the Universal House of Justice has said that in our Feasts, an atmosphere in which women are reluctant to voice their heartfelt views out of fear of belittlement or disapproval from men – that this itself is an oppression against women.

Scholarship can become a powerful force in rooting out prejudice, for the second necessary step in overcoming prejudice

is the conscious acquisition of knowledge.

For instance, consider this statement, by Basil Davidson in his book *The Africans*, published some 30 years ago, and consider what effect his insight, based on knowledge accumulated from years of research and scholarship, could have had on reversing deeply ingrained and assiduously cultivated prejudices about Africa:

“Insofar as one can hope to trace the origins of African civilization, it is . . . in this direction one must look: to the formative problems and solutions found by small groups faced with the destiny of peopling one of the world’s largest and physically most testing land masses. Here it is that one may . . . trace the source of attitudes which have stubbornly combined a firm respect for precedent with a restless onward-shifting readiness for experiment; which have instilled a capacity, greater perhaps than that of any other major civilization, for the optimism which comes from living always on a frontier, on the edge of ‘somewhere else’, on the verge of ‘something different’, where anything may be possible as long as human courage and endeavour are prepared to make it so: as long, indeed, as a man’s inner force or dynamism can avail to drive him forward.”(11)

No one who studies the history and character of African civilization can fail to appreciate its great triumphs, or come to admire, for their inherited attributes, and otherwise, the people who were its creators and are its products.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, when in America, praised the American white people for having fought a war to make black people free. If one studies the American Civil War, including the pattern of events leading up to it and the single-minded determination with which the war was pursued, one cannot fail to be impressed with how the American population, despite strong personal racist attitudes and beliefs even among the enemies of slavery, nevertheless sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives on the battlefield so that African Americans could be free.

Our writings tell us that women have always been oppressed. A study of the history of women, and of the patterns of male dominance in the world today, cannot but create in the mind of any male Baha’i who wishes to see Baha’u’llah’s principle realized in the world, a much deeper appreciation of the issues around the advancement of women, and a greatly changed attitude towards women. Is this necessary? Is there really a problem?

The world of the past has been

ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. (12)

So, yes, there is a problem. But is there a problem in the Baha'i community?

The aggressiveness and competitiveness which animate a dominantly capitalist culture. . . have come to exert too great a sway over the manner of management in the Baha'i community and over the behavior of portions of its rank and file in relation to the Cause. (13)

Yes, there is a problem, at least in the American Baha'i community. And my guess is that if there is a problem in the American Baha'i community, there is probably one in other Baha'i communities as well. Is this a men's issue or a women's issue? After all, one might think, it is women who have to gain their equality.

. . . the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman. . . woman's aspiration toward advancement will be checked by it, and she will gradually become hopeless. – 'Abdu'l-Baha (14)

and,

When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!- 'Abdu'l-Baha (15)

So, yes, it is a men's issue. It's an issue for all of us.

Finally, I would like to touch upon a feature of Baha'i scholarship which makes it outstandingly different and which, if understood and taken to heart, will make scholarship of the future exert a far greater positive influence on society than it has in the past. In the past, in fact, it has been the 'learned' who, all unwittingly, have been chiefly responsible for subverting the religion of God and weakening its influence over the hearts of men. This is why, in this dispensation, the institutions of the 'learned' and the 'rulers' have been separated, so that the learned may rise to their true station, and "pulsate even as the throbbing artery in the body of mankind" (16).

Every one of us has a station within the Kingdom of Names. And the station of the learned in that

Kingdom is high. However, our station within that Kingdom is independent of our spiritual station. It may define and prescribe our sphere of activity, material and even spiritual, while in this world, but in the deepest sense, it does not determine our spiritual state in the next world. One of the primary and most far-reaching features of Baha'i scholarship is detachment from the Kingdom of Names.

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people of God! Righteous men of learning who dedicate themselves to the guidance of others and are freed and well guarded from the promptings of a base and covetous nature are, in the sight of Him Who is the desire of the world, stars of the heaven of true knowledge. They must be treated with deference. --Baha'u'llah (17)

IV. Conclusion

Although scholarship has been encouraged throughout this Dispensation, the Universal House of Justice has called the Baha'i community to a new endeavour. Although each of us has his own arena of service to the Faith and to mankind – each of us teaches the Faith, each of us studies the Writings and strives to gain a deeper understanding – each of us also has unique insights into those Writings. Because of this each of us, to a lesser or greater degree, becomes a scholar of the Faith. So, scholarship is a natural activity for Baha'is – like breathing, really.

The world needs the models which we, from our privileged position of having accepted God's Manifestation, can provide. It needs that rare brand of intellectual development which emanates from an unbiased mind motivated purely by the love of God – and this is something which we, if we develop the capacity Baha'u'llah has placed within His servants, can offer.

Consider. . .

the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. . . . This education is of two kinds. The one is universal. Its influence pervadeth all things and sustaineth them. . . . The other is confined to them that have come under the shadow of this Name, and sought the shelter of this most mighty Revelation. They, however, that have failed to seek this shelter, have deprived themselves of this privilege, and are powerless to benefit from the spiritual sustenance that hath been sent down through the heavenly grace of this Most Great Name. --Baha'u'llah(18)

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